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ADVICE

A BOOK OF POEMS

MAXWELL RODENHEIM

30 First ed



ADVICE

Daniel C. Moran Jr. - 23 -

NEW POETRY
FALL, 1920

OCTOBER

By Robert Bridges

THE FORERUNNER

By Kahlil Gibran

WORDSWORTH: AN ANTHOLOGY

By R. Cobden-Sanderson

ADVICE

By Maxwell Bodenheim

ADVICE

A BOOK OF POEMS

By MAXWELL BODENHEIM
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**TO
MINNA
WHOSE SMILE IS MY THRONE**

Some of the poems which compose this book have appeared in the *Yale Review*, the *Smart Set*, the *New Republic*, *Reedy's Mirror*, the *Dial*, the *Touchstone*, the *Little Review*, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, the *Century*, and the *New York Tribune*. They are good, in spite of their numerous appearances.

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ADVICE

ADVICE TO A STREET-PAVEMENT

Lacerated grey has bitten
Into your shapeless humility.
Little episodes of roving
Strew their hieroglyphics on your muteness.
Life has given you heavy stains
Like an ointment growing stale.
Endless feet tap over you
With a maniac insistence.

O unresisting street-pavement,
Keep your passive insolence
At the dwarfs who scorn you with their feet.
Only one who lies upon his back
Can disregard the stars.

ADVICE TO A BUTTER-CUP

Undistinguished butter-cup
Lost among myriads of others,
To the red ant eyeing you
You are giant stillness.
He pauses on the boulder of a clod,
Baffled by your nearness to the sky.
But to the black loam at your feet
You are the atom of a pent-up dream.

Undistinguished butter-cup,
Take your little breath of contemplation,
Undisturbed by haughty tricks of space.

ADVICE TO A RIVER STEAM-BOAT

The brass band plays upon your decks,
Like a sturdy harlot aping mirth,
And people in starched shields
Stuff their passions with sweet words,
Life is swishing in the air,
Like a tipsy, unseen bridegroom.

O humbly grunting river boat,
Take the churning water and the sun
Like one who plays with his own chains
And flings their turmoil to the sky.
Only a voice can leap above high walls.

FOUNDRY WORKERS

Brown faces twisted back
Into an ecstasy of tight resistance;
Eyes that are huge sweat drops
Unheeded by the struggle underneath them —
Throughout the night you stagger under walls
Where life is squeezed to squealing bitterness.
Beneath your heaving flash of limbs
Your thoughts are smashed to a dejected trance
And you are swept, like empty mites,
Into a glistening frenzy of motion . . .
Yet, on a Sunday afternoon
I have seen you straightening your backs with
 slow smiles;
Walking through the streets
And patiently groping for lost outlines.
Your lips were placid bruises
Almost fearing to relax,
And often out upon some green

Your legs swung themselves into long lost
shapes.

Perhaps upon your death-beds
You will lift your hands, with a wraith of grace,
Showing life a last, weak curve
Of the rhythm he could not kill.

ADVICE TO A HORNÈD TOAD

Hornèd Toad of cloven brown,
Rock souls have dwindled to your eyes
And thrown a splintered end upon your blood.
Night and day have vanished
To you, who squat and watch
Years loosen one sand grain until
Its fall becomes your moment.
Tall things plunge over you,
Slashing their dreams with motion
That holds the death of all they seek,
But you, to whom fierce winds are ripples,
Do not move lest you lose the taste of stillness.

Hornèd Toad of cloven brown,
Never hop from your grey rock crevice
Mute with interwoven beginnings and ends.
The fluid lies of motion
Leave no remembrance behind.

ADVICE TO A FOREST

O trees, to whom the darkness is a child
Scampering in and out of your long, green
beards;

O trees, to whom sunlight is a tattered pilgrim
Counting his dreams within your hermitage
And slipping down the road, in twilight robes;
O trees, whose leaves make an incense of sound
Reeling with the beat of your caught feet,
Do not mingle your tips in startled hatred,
When little men come to fell you.

These men will saw you into strips
Of pointed brooding, blind with paint,
But underneath you men will chase
The grey staccato of their lives
Down a glaring maze of walls
Much harder than your own.
And when, at last, the deep brown gaze
Of stolidly amorous time steals over you,

The little men who bit into your hearts
Will stray off in a patter of rabbits' feet.
Look down upon these children then
With the aloof and weary tolerance
That all still things possess,
O trees, to whom the darkness was a child
Scampering in and out of your long, green
beards.

RATTLESNAKE MOUNTAIN FABLE I

Rounded to a wide eyed clownishness
Crowned by the shifting bravado
Of his long, brown ears,
The rabbit peeked at the sky.
To him, the sky seemed an angelic
Pasture stripped to phantom tranquility,
Where one could nibble thoughtfully.
He longed to leave his mild furtiveness
And speak to a boldness puzzled by his flesh.
With one long circle of despairing grace
He flashed into the air,
Leaping toward his heaven.
But down he crashed against a snake
Who ate him with a meditative interest.
From that day on the snake was filled
With little, meek whispers of concern.
The crushed and peaceful rabbit's dream
Cast a groping hush upon his blood.

He curled inertly on a rock,
In cryptic, wilted savageness.
In the end, his dry, grey body
Was scattered out upon the rock,
Like a story that could not be told.

ADVICE TO A BLUE-BIRD

Who can make a delicate adventure
Of walking on the ground?
Who can make grass-blades
Arcades for pertly careless straying?
You alone, who skim against these leaves,
Turning all desire into light whips
Moulded by your deep blue wing-tips,
You who shrill your unconcern
Into the sternly antique sky.
You to whom all things
Hold an equal kiss of touch.

Mincing, wanton blue-bird,
Grimace at the hoofs of passing men.
You alone can lose yourself
Within a sky, and rob it of its blue!

TO A FRIEND

Your head is steel cut into drooping lines
That make a mask satirically meek:
Your face is like a tired devil weak
From drinking many vague and unsought wines.
The sullen skepticism of your eyes
For ever trying to transcend itself,
Is often entered by a wistful elf
Who sits naïvely unperturbed and wise.

And this same remnant, with its youthful wiles
Held curiously apart from blasphemies,
Twirls starlight shivers out upon your sneers
And changes them to little, startled smiles.
And all your insolence drops to its knees
Before the half-won grandeur of past years.

ADVICE TO A WOMAN

The sloping lines of your shoulders
Speak of Chinese pagodas.
They clash with your western face
Where child and courtesan
Clasp each other in a feigned embrace.
Life, to you, is a liquid mirror.
You stand with delicate, perpetual amazement,
Vainly seeking your reflection.

RATTLESNAKE MOUNTAIN FABLE II

August sauntered down the mountain-side,
Dropping mottled, turbid wraiths of decay.
The air was like an old priest
Disrobing without embarrassment
Before the dark and candid gaze of night.
But these things brought no pause
To the saucily determined squirrel.
His eyes were hungrily upturned
To where the stars hung — icily clustered nuts
Dotting trees of solitude.
He saw the stars just over the horizon,
And they seemed to grow
On trees that he could reach.
So he scampered on, from branch to branch,
Wondering why the fairy nut-trees
Ran away from him.
But, looking down, he spied
A softly wild cheeked mountain pool,
And there a handful of fairy nuts

Bit into the indigo cupping them.
With a squeal of weary happiness
The squirrel plunged into the mountain pool,
And as he drowned within its soundless heart
The fairy nuts were jigging over him,
Like the unheard stirring of a poem.

ADVICE TO A BUTTERFLY

Aimless petal of the wind,
Spinning gently weird circles,
To the flowers underneath
You are a drunken king of motion;
To the plunging winds above
You are momentary indecision.

Aimless petal of the wind,
Waver carelessly against this June.
The universe, like you, is but
The drowsy arm of stillness
Spinning gently weird circles in his sleep.

ADVICE TO A POOL

Be a liquid threshold for the dawn
And let night touch you with his back.
The earth-bowl prisoning you, and cold night
winds

Are only pause and rhythm
Within an endless fantasy,
But you, like they, can be
A dream from the loins of a dream,
And build a golden stairway of escape.

O coolly unperturbed pool,
Slap your ripples in laughter at men,
Who splash you with their lordly hands.
Time is but a phantom dagger
That motion lifts to slay itself.

WHEN FOOLS DISPUTE

A trickle of dawn insinuated itself
Through the crevices of black satiation.
The elderly trees coughed, lightly, hurriedly,
In remonstrance against the invasion.
Lean with a virginal poison,
The grass-blades shook, immune to light and
time.

A bird lost in a tree
Shrilly flirted with its energy . . .
One fool, in the garden, spoke to another.

ADVICE TO A GRASS-BLADE

Thin and dark green symbol
Of an earth forever raising
Myriads of chained wings,
Breezes have a form, to you,
And sounds break into vivid shape.
The proud finality of tiny sight
Cannot lure your pliant blindness.

Thin and dark green blade,
Be not awed by trees and men
Whose sound is all that gives them life.
You reach the sky because your face
Is not turned toward it.

EAST-SIDE: NEW YORK

An old Jew munches an apple,
With conquering immersion
All the thwarted longings of his life
Urge on his determined teeth.
His face is hard and pear-shaped;
His eyes are muddy capitulations;
But his mouth is incongruous.
Softly, slightly distended,
Like that of a whistling girl,
It is ingenuously haunting
And makes the rest of him a soiled, grey back-
ground.
Hopes that lie within their grave
Of submissive sternness,
Have spilled their troubled ghosts upon this
mouth,
And a tortured belief
Has dwindled into tenderness upon it . . .
He trudges off behind his push-cart
And the Ghetto walks away with him.

TO A MAN

Master of earnest equilibrium,
You are a Christ made delicate
By centuries of baffled meditation.
You curve an old myth to a peaceful sword,
Like some sleep-walker challenging
The dream that gave him shape.
With gentle, antique insistence
You place your child's hand on the universe
And trace a smile of love within its depths.
And yet, the whirling scarecrow men have made
Of something that eludes their sight,
May have the startling simplicity of your smile.

Once every thousand years
Stillness fades into a shape
That men may crucify.

THE CHILD MEDITATES

The oak-tree in front of my house
Smells different every morning.
Sometimes it smells fresh and wise
Like my mother's hair.
Sometimes it stands ashamed
Because it does n't own the smell
It borrowed from our flower-garden.
Sometimes it has a windy smell,
As though it had come back from a long walk.
The oak-tree in front of my house
Has different smells, like grown up people.

My doll hides behind her pink cheeks,
So that you can't see when she moves,
But it doesn't matter because
She always moves when no one is looking,
And that is why people think she is still.
People laugh when I say that my doll is alive,

But if she were dead, my fingers
Wouldn't know that they were touching her.
She lives inside a little house.
And laughs because I cannot find the door.

The colours in my room
Meet each other and hesitate.
Is that what people call shape?
Nobody seems to think so,
But I believe that lines are dead shapes
Unless they fall against each other
And look surprised, like the colours in my room!

PIERROT OBJECTS

They have made me an airy apology
For the crude insistence of their flesh!
They have made me twist my tongue
Into fickle nonchalance!
With a languid impudence
I have tarried underneath the moon,
While the haggard reticence
Of their lives forgot itself within me!
Well, I am rebelling
At the men who make me
Their grimacing marionnette!
Let them find another dancing-teacher
For their dull, unruffled fears.
I am off to tear my black and white
Into shreds, within a valley
Where nakedness and colours do not need
An artificial night to make them brave!

COLUMBINE REFLECTS

They have moulded my face with a tear and a
sneer.

They have sandalled me with caprice,
And the heart they have given me
Is a bag of red tissue-paper.
Their loves are ragged and fat
And seek the consolation
Of a tinkling effigy!
But even an effigy may wink
An eye at its slinking masters!
I can laugh at their frantic, tattered arms
Spinning me into impish posturings,
And jeer at the faces behind me!
After my play I go to sleep,
But they must sit, heavily looking at each other.

RATTLE-SNAKE MOUNTAIN DIALOGUE

RATTLE-SNAKE MOUNTAIN

Every night the sky grips my shoulder, in pain.
The cows upon my slope
Attack their blades of grass with less decision.
The boulders reaching in to form my ribs,
Are touched by evening dizziness, to dust,
And lose their fierce pretence of hardness.
Three crows in a row
Search for clearer tongues, with steady discords.

MAN

The nervous dissolution
Which men call beauty stands
Sternly watching itself.

RATTLE-SNAKE MOUNTAIN

Evening, staggering under dead men's tongues,
Makes light of my loneliness.

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He comes like a madman dissolved
Into unbearable quietness.
But, drinking my vigorous muteness,
He melts into that stream of seeking motion
Which men call morning.

MAN

You teach him to make his recompense
A solitary unfolding
Walking perilously
Between the scowls of life and death.

RATTLE-SNAKE MOUNTAIN

When he goes he is something more than him-
self.

He holds a lean alertness
That, green as any leaf,
Takes the flutterings of life, unperturbed.

MAN

Beauty is a proud stare
Challenging all things to remove
Their inattentive clamours:

**And some things bow abruptly,
Timidly stroking their untouched skins.**

RATTLE-SNAKE MOUNTAIN

And thus evening bows into morning.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN A PAST AND PRESENT POET

PAST POET

I wrote of roses on a woman's breast,
Glowing as though her blood
Had welled out to a spellbound fierceness;
And the glad, light mixture of her hair.
I wrote of God and angels.
They stole the simple blush of my desire
To make their isolated triumph human.
Knights and kings flooded my song,
Catching with their glittering clash
The unheard boldness in my life.
Gods and nymphs slipped through my voice,
And with the lofty scurrying of their feet
Spurned the smirched angers of my days.

PRESENT POET

You raised an unhurried, church-like escape.

[41]

You lingered in shimmering idleness;
Or lengthened a prayer into a lance;
Or strengthened a thought till it heaved off all
 of life
And dropped its sightless heaven into your
 smile.
Life, to us, is a colourless tangle.
Like madly gorgeous weavers
Our eyes reiterate themselves on life.

PAST POET

My towering simplicity
Loosening an evening of belief
Over the things it dared not view,
Gladly shunned reality
Just as your mad weaver does.

PRESENT POET

Reality is a formless lure,
And only when we know this
Do we dare to be unreal.

SMILES

Smiles are the words beyond the words
That thoughts abandon helplessly.
Upon this nervous shop-girl's face,
Where clusters of tiny limpness meet,
A frightened spark leaps high and drops
Into the hot pause of a banished love.
A lustrelessly plump
Girl beside her does not know
That her face for moments glows
Into a helpless solitude.
Upon an old man's face
Are gleams of meek embarrassment —
The faded presence of some old debt?
This woman's face is scorched
By a torch that falls from weary hands
And makes her laugh an unheard lie.
The face of this tamed sprite
Shimmers with an understanding

Of the opaque loss she cannot bear,
And I see that smiles are sometimes
Words beyond the words
That thoughts abandon hopefully.

THE COURTESAN CHATS

Last night I met a passive man
With almost no curve to his face,
And skin relentlessly white.
He made me tell his fortune
With a pack of cards.

"Jack of hearts — your love will be
A scullion overturning trays of food
And standing dubiously in their midst."

"Queen of diamonds — you will have a wife
Like a thistle dipped in frost,
Helpless in your sheathed hands."

"Deuce of clubs — a downcast jester
Will pester you with slanting malice
When you seek to play the king."

"Ace of hearts — your life will stand
Straight in a desperate majesty,
Its lurid robes ever slipping
And one wound endlessly dripping."

[45]

The passive man blew out a candle
On the table and bade me leave,
Not desiring me to see his face.

THE MOUNTEBANK CRITICIZES

I lose all sense of profiles,
Strolling through your greys and blacks and
 browns!

No man bestows his orange robe
Soberly upon your uncoloured pavements,
Rebuking life for being death.

No woman taunts her sorrows
With a coloured haughtiness.

When you take to colours, you are ashamed,
Like pages nibbling at a pilfered tart.
You go back quickly to your coldness.
And since you have no colours on your clothes,
You walk in straight and measured lilt
As befits the seriously blind.

Your women do not stroll as though
Each step were a timid intrigue
Woven into the climax to which they fare.

Pistols, rhapsodies and heavy odours
Drugged the lustre of my time.
Yet, we had a virtue.
We lavished colours on our backs
And ravished our sorrow with brightness
That often gave a lightness to our feet!

TO LI T'AI PO

They are writing poems to you:
White devils who have not
Smeared the distant yellow of your life
Upon their skins.
Faces where snob and harlequin
Ogle each other in two, cold colours,
White and red;
Faces where middle age
Sits, tearing a last gardenia;
Faces continually cracked
By the brittle larceny of age;
Faces where emotions
Stand disarmed within a calm mirage:
These faces bend over paper
And steal from you a little silver and red
So that their lives may seem to bleed
Under the prick of a flashing need.

The old and tired smile
Of one who spies too much within himself
To spare the effort of a halting frown,
Brushed its sceptre over your face.
You gave kind eyes to your hope,
Desiring it to grope unfearing
Underneath the toppling mountain-tops.
The wine you drank was a lake
In which you splashed and found a vigour;
The wine you drank was void of taste.
Your yellow skin resembled
A balanced docility
Smiling at all things — even at itself —
Li T'ai Po.

INSANITY

Like a vivid hyperbole,
The sun plunged into April's freshness,
And struck its sparkling madness
Against the barnlike dejection
Of this dark red insane asylum.
A softly clutching noise
Stumbled from the open windows.
Now and then obliquely reeling shrieks
Rose, as though from men
To whom death had assumed
An inexpressibly kindly face.
A man stood at one window,
His gaunt face trembling underneath
A feverish jauntiness.
A long white feather slanted back
Upon his almost shapeless hat,
Like an innocent evasion.
Hotly incessant, his voice

Methodically flogged the April air:
A voice that held the clashing bones
Of happiness and fear;
A voice in which emotion
Sharply ridiculed itself;
A monstrously vigorous voice
Mockingly tearing at life
With an unanswerable question.

Hollowed out by his howl,
I turned and saw an asylum guard.
His petulantly flabby face
Rolled into deathlike chips of eyes.
He bore the aimless confidence
Of one contentedly playing with other men's
wings.
He walked away; the man above still shrieked.
I could not separate them.

TRACK-WORKERS

The rails you carry cut into your hands,
Like the sharp lips of an unsought lover.
As you stumble over the ties
Sunlight is clinging, yellow spit
Raining down upon your faces.
You are the living cuspidors of day.
Dirt, its teasing ghost, dust,
And passionless kicks of steel, fill you.
Flowers sprouting near the tracks,
Brush their lightly odoured hands
In vain against your stale jackets of sweat.
Within you, minds and hearts
Are snoring to the curt rhythm of your breath.
You do not see this blustering blackbird
Promenading on a barbed-wire fence.
He eyes you with spritelike hauteur,
Unable to understand
Why your motions endlessly copy each other.

One of you, a meek and burly Pole,
Peers a moment at the strutting blackbird
With a fleeting shade of dull resentment. . . .
There is always one among you
Who recoils from glimpsing corpses.

FIGURE

Through the turbulent servility
Of a churlish city street
He strides opaquely; nothing in his walk
Resembles an advancing gleam.
His legs are muffled iron
Stubbornly following even thoughts,
His gaily pugnacious head
Seems worried because no dread
Remains for it to slay.
His eyes hold an austerity
That recalls itself while leaping,
And often melts into amusement.
The bent poise of his body
Tells of walls that threw him back,
Only to crumble underneath
The stunned friendliness of his face.
Through the angularly churlish street
He walks, and stoops beneath the captured
weight
Of eyes that do not see him.

NEGROES

The loose eyes of an old man
Shone aloof upon his boyish face;
And a sluggish innocence
Hugged his dull brown skin.
He sang a hymn caught from his elders
And his voice resembled
A quavering, feverish laugh
Softened in a swaying cradle.
His life had found a refuge in his voice,
And the rest of him was sickly flesh
Ignorant of life and death.
Like a crushed, excited clown
His mother shuffled out upon the porch.
Slowly her dark brown face resolved
Into the hushed and sulky look
Of one who stands within a dim-walled trap.
Lazily uncertain,
She raised the boy into her arms.

**Then her voice swung in the air
Like a quavering, feverish laugh
Softened in a swaying cradle.**

BROADWAY

With sardonic futility
The multi-coloured crowd,
Hurried by fervent sensuality,
Flees from something carried on its back.
Endlessly subdued, a sound
Pours up from the crowd,
Like some one ever gasping for breath
To utter releasing words.
Through the artificial valley
Made by gaudy evasions,
The stifled crowd files up and down,
Stabbing thought with rapid noises.
Women strutting dulcetly,
Embroider their unappeased hungers,
And men stumble toward a flitting opiate.
Sometimes a moment breaks apart
And one can hear the knuckles
Of children rapping on towering doors:

[58]

**Rapping on the highway
Where civilization parades
Its frozen amiabilities!**

**FIFTH AVENUE
(NEW YORK)**

Seasons bring nothing to this gulch
Save a harshly intimate anecdote
Scrawled, here and there, on paint and stone.
The houses shoulder each other
In a forced and passionless communion.
Their harassed angles rise
Like a violent picture-puzzle
Hiding a story that only ruins could reveal;
Their straight lines, robbed of power,
Meet in dwarfed rebellion.
Sometimes they stand like vastly flattened faces
Suffering ants to crawl
In and out of their gaping mouths.
Sometimes, in menial attitudes
They stand like Gothic platitudes
Slipshodly carved in dark brown stone.

Tarnished solemnities of death
Cast their transfigured hue on this avenue.
The cool and indiscriminate glare
Of sunlight seems to desecrate a tomb,
And the racing people seem
A stream of accidental shadows.
Hard noises strike one's face and make
It numb with momentary reality,
But the noiseless undertone returns
And they change to unreal jests
Made by death.

YOUNG WOMAN

So we have a face
Cupped by tender insolences,
Half repenting insolences
Teasing their own angers.
Then, a tense exuberance
Brushes them away
And burns a humbly erect
Queen upon her face.
This happens in the space
Between a frown and indecision.
Her face becomes forlornly wild,
And a beggarly impatience
Hovers into furtive shame.
All the supplely intricate flame
Vanishes, and leaves no mark.
Her eyes are violently dark
With a hopeless waiting;
Her lips are isolated tatters —

All that is left of shattered recreating.
Then, as quickly as she fled,
The humble queen returns.
Staring and unappeased
She eyes her crumpled hands.

TWO WOMEN ON A STREET

This street is callous apathy
In a scale of greys and browns.
Its black roof-line suggests
Flat bodies unable to rise.
Even its screams are listlessness
Having an evil dream.
Its air is swarthy rawness
Troubled with ash cans and cellars.

An old woman ambles on
With a black bag that seems part of her back,
And a candidly hawk-like face.
She croons a smothered lullaby
That sifts a flitting roundness
Into her sharply parted face.
Then she surrenders her hand
To the welter of a garbage can.
A hugely wilted woman slinks by

With a cracked stare on her face.
Her eyes are beaten discs
Of the lamplight's ghastly keenness.
She glides away as though the night
Were a lover flogging her;
Glides into the callous apathy
Of this street, like one who cringes
Happily into her lover's hallway.

ADVICE TO MAPLE-TREES

O little maple-trees,
Slender and unkempt, looking with shaggy
askance
Upon the moon-spiked solitude;
O little maple-trees,
Growing a little toward the sky
That touches you to all eyes save your own,
You rattle insistently for wings,
But wings could never tear
The stain of earth from your feet:
The earth that gnaws at you until
Your wing-cries strike the autumn night.
You see, with me, this crescent moon
Juggled on the tawny fingertip
Of a running cloud.
The touch of your desire, or its fall,
Would but be symbols of an equal death.

BOARDING-HOUSE EPISODE

Apples race into appetites:
The unswerving mechanism of the table
Hurries through the last dish of supper.
Then an undulating interlude
From people who have spent one pleasure,
Distractedly juggling its aftermath
And peering at new desires.
One woman gazes at another
While twitching murder shimmers in her eyes
And skims across her face.
Violets in a madman's scene,
Suspended in the air,
Are the eyes of her neighbour.
And in between them sits the nervous man
With face like pouting gargoyle,
Whose brown eyes shout the things he cannot
say:
Explosive evasions;

Fears too tired to shriek;
Renunciations groaning from their dungeons.
He eyes each woman, like a man
Solemnly trying to walk on mysterious ice.
Crisp inanities ripple back and forth
Among these three, like ghostly parrots
Visiting each other's cages.
She with crazy, violet eyes,
Plays with her fork, as though its clink
Rhymed with secret, chained thoughts;
She with murder in her eyes,
And curtly voluminous body,
Evenly plays her child-rôle.
Cringing on the rim of middle age,
With broken shields piled at her feet,
She has made this man a haunted palace
And she stands before the door
She dare not open, with a dagger
For the woman standing at her side.

They sit, afterwards, upon the veranda,
Meekly greeting the velvet swagger of evening:
Woman with twisted, violet eyes,
Woman with hidden murder on her lips,
And man like a pouting gargoyle.
Then, like tired children,

**Their words grow cool and lazy.
They draw closer to each other
And, with a trembling curiosity,
Look at each other's hands.**

VAUDEVILLE MOMENT

They have carved a battle
Across your hard face:
Transfigured conflict,
Lines like suspended lances.
Your voice must be the uneven
Clink of the last carver's chisel.
Your soul must be a pious subterfuge
Squinting its admiring eyes
At the lifeless battle lining your face. . . .
Middle aged vaudeville conductor,
With a hunted leanness on your body,
Sometimes the swing of your baton
Sways with a brooding patience
That violates your ended face.

Two acrobats appear,
With their automaton bows.
Their unlit motion does not strike
The air into a hugging flame.

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They are blue and orange corpses
Whirled in a sacrilegious festival.
They vividly resemble
The chiseled battle that grips
This lean conductor's face:
Motion without life,
And life that holds no motion!

TO ORRICK JOHNS

The tread-mill roar that ever tramps between
The smirched geometries of this stern place,
Sweeps vainly on your drowsily reckless face
Lost in a swirl of raped loves barely seen.
Sometimes your keenly pagan lips are raised
By thoughts too tense to shape themselves in
speech:

Still, wounded thoughts that silently beseech
Your life to make them impotent and dazed.

O tangled and half-strangled child, you shrink
For ever from yourself, and wear a pose
Of nimble and impenetrable pride.
Yet sometimes, wavering on the sudden brink
Of jaded bitterness, you drop your clothes
And weave a prayer into your naked stride.

YOUNG POET

The grinning clamour on your face
Dies abruptly, for moments:
Boldness and timidity
Are swept, transfigured, against each other.
But the glistening turmoil
Once more spurns itself with jests
That light its troubled hands.

When too much pain has lowered
The eyelids of your mood,
A peaceful humour wraps your face.
You are like an old man
Watching children fly from his fingertips.
In your kirtle of borrowed skies
You find a sorrow luring your horizons
Into hesitating brightness. . . .
When night remembers, you have straightened
Into stealthy, angry calmness
Fingering it first, unsent arrow.

[73]

STEEL-MILLS: SOUTH CHICAGO

I

This red hush toppling over the sky,
Wanders one step toward the stars
And dies in a questioning shiver.
The steel-mill chimneys fling their gaunt seeking
A little distance into the red
That softly combs their smoky hair.
The steel-mill chimneys only live at night
When crimson light makes love to them
And star-light trickles through the red,
Like glimpses of some far-off fairy tale.
Throughout the day the steel-mill chimneys
stand
Rigidly within the wind-whirled glare:
Only night can bring them supple straightness.

II

From the little, brown gate that does not see
them
Because its eyes are blind with wooing soot,

An endless stream of men scatters out
Into the cool bewilderment of morning.
Upon their lips a limply child-like surrender
Curves out to the light, as though they felt
The presence of an unassuming strangeness.
The morning hides from their eyes:
They walk on, in great strides,
Like blind men swinging over a well-known
scene.

Their faces twitch with echoes of iron fists:
Their faces hold a swarthy stupor
Loosened by little fingers of morning light
Until it droops into reluctant life.
And then their eyes, made flat by night,
Swell into a Madonna-like surprise
At children trooping back in huge disguise.
The oranges in lunch-room windows change
To sleek suns dipped in sleepy light,
And rounded tarts in china plates
Are like red heart-beats, resting but not dead.
A trolley-car speeds by
And seems a strident lyric of motion.
Wagons rumble down the street
Like drums enticing weariness to step. . . .
The hearts of these steel-striding men
Ascend and blend within their eyes,

And yet, these men are unaware of this.
They only feel a fluid relief
Voicing, in a clustered roar,
The cries of struggling thoughts unshaped by
words.

But there are some who break forth from the
rest.

This old Hungarian strides along
And binds naïvely-winged prayer-sandals
Upon the heavy feet of shuffling loves.
Gently, he plays with his beard
As though his fingers touched a woman's hair.
And this young Slav whose surly blasphemy
Curls his face into a simple hate,
Has taken iron into his laugh
And uses it to hew his stony mind.
While this Italian whose deep olive skin
Shines like sunlight groping through dense
leaves,

Forgets his battered happiness
And bows with mock grace to his shouting day.
Beside him is a fellow-countryman
Walking aimless, dazed with joy of motion.
Upon his face a glistening vacancy
Lights the mildly querying thoughts
That seek each other but never meet.

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Behind him steps a stalwart Pole
Whose rhythmic, stately insolence
Turns the sidewalk into a grey carpet,
Grey as the shades that race across his face
And show the savage squalor of his soul.
Night has broken her heart upon him,
Only scarring his bitter smile.
A street of little, jack-o'-lantern houses
Veering into leering saloons,
Where the night, a crazy child,
Dips herself in fallow rouge
And chases oaths and heavy mirth
And even human beings:
Where the smoky sadness of the steel-mills
Wanders hesitantly into death
And drops a ghostly blur upon this girl.
Her numbly waxen, cherub face
Emerges gently from the doorway's blackness
As though the dark had given birth to it.
And then the falling light reveals
That something of a village hangs about her:
Something slumbering and ample.
The doorway is too small to hold
Her shoulders that are like a hill's broad curves
Dwindled in the distance. . . .
She is one of many earth-curved girls

[77]

Who listened to the insistent tinkle
Of wind-winged music from a far-off land:
Listened and knew not
That their own hearts faintly played.
So she ran to this far phantom,
Only finding it within herself
When the city's sly fists rained upon it.
Then once more she fled
With a dead heart whose restless pallor
Crept to squalid wantonness, for refuge.
And now she stands within this doorway,
Uttering muffled innuendoes
To the drained men of her race.
Yet, something of a village hangs about her:
Something slumbering and ample
Stealing from the earth curves of her shoulders.

III

The steel-mill workers straggle down this street,
Clanging shut the doorways of their souls,
And the sound rips their lips open.
The steel-mill workers do not know of this:
They only seek something that will sweeten
The dirt that has eaten into their flesh
And change it to raw music.
They straggle down this street,

Their faces slack and oiled with amorousness.
Like cats they play with their desires,
Biting them with little laughs
Until the sallow houses draw them in.
And then the night pursues their revelry:
Echoes from the shut doors of their souls.

IV

Three bent women and a child
Stoop before the steel-mill gate
As though the morning's ghastly murmur
Washed against them in a wave
Stiffening them into resisting curves.
One is old and floridly misshapen.
Years have melted out within her frame,
Flooding her with lukewarm loves.
The wrinkles on her flabby face
Are like a faded scrawl of pain
Scattered by the flesh on which it rests.
Her frayed shawl hanging unaware of her
Is a symbol of her heart.
The woman standing at her side
Is tall and like a slanting scarecrow
Coldly jerking in the morning's glare.
Only when she lifts a bony hand
Tapping life against her face,

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Does the image disappear.
Dead dreams dangle in her heart,
Limply hanging from their rainbow sashes,
And whenever one sash trembles,
Then, she lifts a gnarled hand to her face
And tastes a moment of departing life.
Near her stands a slimly rigid woman
With an iron fear upon her bones.
A worn strait-jacket of lines
Cuts the dying youth upon her face.
The slender child beside her,
Buried within staidly murky clothes,
Glances frightenedly up at her mother:
Glances as one who dances to a gate
And fumbles for a latch that hides itself.
Then from the rusty-revered steel-mill gate
An endless stream of men scatter out
Into the cool bewilderment of morning.
Upon their lips a limply child-like surrender
Curves out to the light, as though they felt
The presence of an unassuming strangeness.

SOUTH STATE STREET: CHICAGO

I

**Rows of blankly box-like buildings
Raise their sodden architecture
Into the poised lyric of the sky.
At their feet, pawn-shops and burlesque
theatres
Yawn beneath their livid confetti.
In the pawn-shop windows, violins,
Cut-glass bowls and satchels mildly blink
Upon the mottled turbulence outside,
And sit with that detached assurance
Gripping things inanimate.
Near them, slyly shaded cabarets
Stand in bland and ornate sleep,
And the glassy luridness
Of penny-arcades flays the eyes.
The black crowd clatters like an idiot's wrath.**

II

Wander with me down this street
Where the spectral night is caught
Like moon-paint on a colourless lane . . .
On this corner stands a woman
Sleekly, sulkily complacent
Like a tigress nibbling bits of sugar.
At her side, a brawny, white-faced man
Whose fingers waltz upon his checkered suit,
Searches for one face amidst the crowd.
(His smile is like a rambling sword.)
His elbows almost touch a snowy girl
Whose body blooms with cool withdrawal.
From her little nook of peaceful scorn
She casts unseeing eyes upon the crowd.
Near her stands a weary newsboy
With a sullenly elfin face.
The night has leaned too intimately
On the frightened scampering of his soul.
But to this old, staidly patient woman
With her softly wintry eyes,
Night bends down in gentle revelation
Undisturbed by joy or hatred.
At her side two factory girls
In slyly jaunty hats and swaggering coats,
Weave a twinkling summer with their words;

A summer where the night parades
Rakishly, and like a gold Beau Brummel.
With a gnome-like impudence
They thrust their little, pink tongues out
At men who sidle past.
To them, the frantic dinginess of day
Has melted to caressing restlessness
Tingling with the pride of breasts and hips.
At their side two dainty, languid girls
Playing with their suavely tangled dresses,
Touch the black crowd with unsearching eyes.
But the old man on the corner,
Bending over his cane like some tired warrior
Resting on a sword, peers at the crowd
With the smouldering disdain
Of a King whipped out of his domain.
For a moment he smiles uncertainly.
Then wears a look of frail sternness.

Musty, Rabelaisian odours stray
From this naïvely gilded family-entrance
And make the body of a vagrant
Quiver as though unseen roses grazed him.
His face is blackly stubbled emptiness
Swerving to the rotted prayers of eyes.
Yet, sometimes his thin arm leaps out

And hangs a moment in the air,
As though he raised a violin of hate
And lacked the strength to play it.
A woman lurches from the family-entrance.
With tense solicitude she hugs
Her can of beer against her stunted bosom
And mumbles to herself.
The trampled blasphemy upon her face
Holds up, in death, its watery, barren eyes.
Indifferently, she brushes past the vagrant:
Life has peeled away her sense of touch.

III

With groping majesty, the endless crowd
Pounds its searching chant of feet
Down this tawdrily resplendent street.
People stray into a burlesque theatre
Framed with scarlet, blankly rotund girls.
Here a burly cattle-raiser walks
With the grace of wind-swept prairie grass.
Behind him steps a slender clerk
Tendering his sprightly stridency
To the stolid, doll-like girl beside him.
At his side a heavy youth
Dully stands beneath his swaggering mask;

And a smiling man in black and white
Walks, like some Pierrot grown middle-aged.

Mutely twinkling fragments of a romance:
Tiny lights stand over this cabaret.
Men and women jovially emboldened
Stroll beneath the curtained entrance,
And their laughs, like softly brazen cow-bells,
Change the scene to a strange Pastoral.
Hectic shepherdesses drunk with night,
Women mingle their coquettish colours. . . .
Suddenly, a man leaps out
From the doorway's blazing pallor,
Smashing into the drab sidewalk.
His drunken lips and eyelids break apart
Like a clown in sudden suicide.
Then the mottled nakedness
Of the scene comes, like a blow.

Stoically crushed in hovering grey
Night lies coldly on this street.
Momentary sounds crash into night
Like ghostly curses stifled in their birth. . . .
And over all the blankly box-like buildings
Raise their sodden architecture
Into the poised lyric of the sky.

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